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The Fiasco in Moscow

The worst security breach in embassy history leaves U.S. officials playing 'three blind mice'

Congressman Daniel Mica was in lofty theatrical dudgeon. Glaring from the podium of the House subcommittee on international relations at the hapless State Department and Marine officials below, the Florida Democrat brandished a child's Magic Slate. Did they mean to tell him, he demanded, that when a delegation of congressmen visits the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, "we'll have to write down everything we want to say on these *scribble pads?*"

Well, in fact, yes. American diplomats in Moscow these days may have just one edge left on the envoys of Napoleon's time: they can travel by jetliner rather than stagecoach. In most other respects, the spreading spy scandal in the shabby old U.S. Embassy has stopped high-tech diplomacy in its tracks. Fearful of bugs that might be planted in cars, offices, telephones, coding devices, even typewriters and Xerox machines, embassy officials are talking on scribble pads when whispering isn't safe enough. They communicate with the world outside in laborious longhand, sending letters by courier. To demoralized staffers agonizing over the alleged spying of two Marine guards and the suspicion that more of them might be involved, the crippled communications are symbolic of at least half a dozen major and minor setbacks for embassy staffers in the past two years. "This is pretty devastating," mourned a knowledgeable source in Washington. "We're three blind mice in the Soviet Union."

It was the worst security breach in the history of any U.S. embassy. The two Marine guards, Sgt. Clayton Lonetree and Cpl. Arnold Bracy, stood charged with espionage for allegedly letting Soviet agents roam through the embassy while the Marines stood night guard last year; as their interrogators told it, they had been seduced by Soviet women in a classic KGB "honey trap." A third Marine, Staff Sgt. Robert Stufflebeam, was held on suspicion of dallying with other Soviet women. As the embassy's security chief was recalled and the 28 Marines in Moscow were ordered home for polygraph tests, the word in Washington was that at least two more Marines may have violated the nonfraternization policy. Those two, said chairman Les Aspin of the House Armed Services Committee, may also have been on duty together; the ominous implication was "that this thing was very much bigger than we had thought."

'The bubble': Nobody knew for sure what the Soviet intruders might have learned, photographed or planted. The worst-case assumption was that nothing said or written in the embassy for the past year is still secret, not even the talk in "the bubble," the ninth-floor, clear plastic room-within-a-room designed to shield the most confidential conversations. Last week technicians flown in for emergency duty were working 18-hour shifts to debug, rewire and partially rebuild the compromised areas. Jack Matlock, the new ambassador, promised secure communications in time for Secretary of State George Shultz's visit next week for arms-reduction talks with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. The work was the first installment of a resanitation project that could cost $20 million to $50 million.

The damage to the country, some outraged officials said, was "incalculable." Still, it was not catastrophic: in intelligence terms, the Moscow embassy is mainly a listening post. Staffers have assumed for years that security is at best dubious, and the just-retired ambassador, Arthur Hartman, says he never felt free from eavesdropping in his car, home or office—though he did feel safe in the embassy's most secure areas. What the KGB could have learned were not secrets of U.S. weapons or strategy, but mainly what Washington knows about the Soviets and how it knows it. That, however, is surely enough to make a major coup for the KGB. Soviet spokesman Gennady Gerasimov was heavy-handedly twitting U.S. reporters last week about big strong Marines who couldn't resist the charms of Soviet spies. And in Washington, the scandal set off a furious round of finger pointing over who was to blame and what could be done about it. "It seems like real naiveté," said Delaware Sen. William Roth. "We have somehow got to get the State Department to take espionage seriously."

The disaster didn't happen for lack of warning. At least three separate security studies of the Moscow embassy have pointed out risks ranging from ease of access to the vulnerability of the young, mostly single Marine guards. Listening devices have been found in official cars and an antenna turned up in a chimney. In the worst known prior breach, electric typewriters were found to be fitted with tiny devices that could sense each character struck and transmit the data in bursts back through the embassy wiring to listeners outside. Staffers were shaken two years ago when Soviet agents turned out to be tracing their movements with the aid of nearly invisible "spy dust" sprinkled on clothing and doorknobs; for awhile the stuff was feared to be carcinogenic. Perhaps worse is the concern that the new U.S. Embassy now being built is hopelessly infested with bugs. By some accounts, microphones have been embedded in its steel beams and the reinforcing bars in the concrete are wired together to make the whole building one huge antenna. Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, has said the government "ought to tear that thing down and start all over again."

But as congressional watchdogs and national-security hard-liners tell it, reforms to deal with these problems have regularly been stifled by bureaucratic foot dragging and infighting in the State Department. Hartman in particular comes under fire for maintaining that security fears were exaggerated, and for his long resistance to a bill, sponsored by Leahy and Maine's Sen. William Cohen, to force the embassy to phase out more than 200 Soviet citizens who worked there until last October as cooks, maids, drivers and the like. The Soviet staffers were never allowed on secure floors of the building, and they were assumed to be reporting to spymasters; the woman who hired and supervised female staff, herself working in the embassy, has been identified as a colonel in the KGB. Finally the Leahy-Cohen bill passed, only to become moot before it took effect: in retaliation for the U.S. expulsion of 25 Soviets accused of spying at the United Nations, Moscow pulled its nationals out of the embassy and left the diplomats to look after themselves.

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'Greased midgets': Hartman, a career Foreign Service officer, maintains that the main purpose of the embassy is not keeping secrets but "penetrating that closed [Soviet] society." His Foreign Service officers gave priority to that goal and left security largely to the counterspies. There was complacency; one Foreign Service officer boasted as late as last fall that the Soviets couldn't get into secure areas of the embassy unless they used "greased midgets." Hartman argues that security did indeed improve in his five-year stint as ambassador, and that he recommended six months ago that the Marines should be replaced with older, married guards. But he opposed phasing out all Soviet staff, since that would mean recruiting American workers to replace them who would themselves be at least as vulnerable as the Marines to KGB temptations. "We recognized the Soviet employees as a security threat, but balanced that against the greater threat that eliminating them would pose," he told Mica's subcommittee last week.

The Marine guards, an elite crew trained for the job at Quantico, Va., were repeatedly warned about the perils of KGB seducers and supposedly held within rigid rules while in Moscow. Still, Lonetree told interrogators he had managed four trysts with the striking Violetta Seina, a translator at the embassy. Bracy, his alleged accomplice, became involved with Galina Golotina, a cook and sometime babysitter who had a key to at least one embassy staffer's apartment. Although all such contact was formally banned, the embassy atmosphere in reality was less than puritanical. The Marines found female company largely among the European "nannies" brought in to work for Western diplomats. They also had dances and parties, some of which got fairly raucous, and Soviet female staffers sometimes attended. "The Russians really throw the good-looking women at the young lonely males," says Rep. Charles Wilson, a member of the House Intelligence Committee. And being married was hardly sure-fire insurance. Stufflebeam, a widely admired Marine who was second in command of the unit, had his wife with him for part of his tour. Nonetheless, he is suspected of contacts with Soviet women.

None of the charges have been proved, and they might not be. Lonetree's high-profile lawyer, William Kunstler, describes him as a confused and self-contradictory victim of his own fantasies, led on by the fevered encouragement of the security officials he first approached to confess his liaison. Lonetree is still in love with Violetta, his lawyers say, and convinced that the KGB victimized her after she fell in love with him. In any case, one of the lawyers says, Bracy and Lonetree were on duty together for only three nights. But whatever the damage ultimately turns out to be, the Marine spy scandal will have both long- and short-term consequences.

Red in the bed: In the category of comic embarrassment, George Shultz will have a camper van dubbed the Winnebago in Moscow next week, to be parked outside the embassy to handle communications with Washington. The van can bounce secret signals to satellites, officials say, and it could even serve as a private meeting site if the bubble seems insecure. Soviet spokesman Gerasimov, who wondered last week whether one should refer to reds under the bed or in it, may find still more fodder for jokes about the Winnebago.

Work goes on to resanitize the Moscow embassy, and the scandal will surely lend urgency to diplomatic modernizations around the world. A panel led by former deputy CIA director Adm. Bobby Ray Inman has called for replacement or renovation of fully half of the nation's 262 embassies and consulates as vulnerable to terrorists or spies. But the new Moscow embassy is clearly no improvement; yet another U.S. panel is to inspect it next month and recommend whether to try to debug it and finish the construction or start over. And as the Marines march to the polygraph there is no end in sight to the long struggle to come to grips with the costs—financial and otherwise—of keeping security in a democratic society.

LARRY MARTZ *with* JOYCE BARNATHAN *in Moscow,* ROBERT B. CULLEN *and* RICHARD SANDZA *in Washington*